LEI LIANG'S COMPOSITIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND *MY WINDOWS*

An Essay

Presented to

The Faculty of the Moores School of Music

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

By

Hanqing Zhou

December, 2017

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Abstract

Lei Liang (b.1972), a Chinese composer of the new wave, has earned his place in the world of contemporary music through his philosophical approach to composition. Both Eastern and Western cultures have influenced Liang's compositional style. He draws his inspiration from Chinese traditions, and his music represents his unique interpretation of Chinese culture. At the same time, he values independence; he draws upon musical traditions of all cultures, and he does not simply copy existing musical idioms. He believes that as a Chinese composer, he must transcend Chinese identity.

This study illustrates how Liang's personal life experiences influenced his musical creativity and aesthetics. An examination of Liang's essays and interviews reveals how his perspectives on Chinese identity and on traditional Chinese culture influenced the development of his unique musical style. This is followed by an analysis of the stylistic devices in Liang's piano suite, *My Windows*, to demonstrate how he applies his philosophy to musical structure, timbre, and pacing through concepts of one-tone polyphony and breath in music.

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Introduction

Lei Liang (b.1972), a Chinese composer of the new wave, has earned his place in the world of contemporary music through his philosophical approach to composition. Awards such as the Aaron Copland Award (2008), a Guggenheim Fellowship (2009), and the Rome Prize (2011) demonstrate the music world's recognition of Liang's achievements. Liang believes that music-making must transcend the limits of mere terminology; in other words, the language of music as a whole should not identify with any single culture. According to his concept of musical composition, Eastern or Western compositional methods, or a combination thereof, should only serve as tools. His music focuses on depicting the inner meaning and beauty found in the symbolism of images such as magma or the brush-stroke in Chinese calligraphy. The knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture serves as the basis for his compositional philosophy, yet Liang stresses that "the Chinese culture is my source of inspiration but does not define me as a 'Chinese' composer. I am only an individual and a composer from China."[1]

Previous scholarly research on Liang's music primarily focuses on his compositional techniques, but it does not analyze his music in detail or investigate his compositional philosophy. Wenzheng Xu, who has made a short and general introduction to the compositional features in Liang's piano suite *My Windows*, suggests that Liang's musical approach in this work is a result of cultural infusion. Lixia Ban, on the other hand, has given a summary of Liang's overall compositional concepts, and has also contributed an analysis of serialism in Liang's *Verge Quartet*. From Ban's perspective, Liang's music inherited

[1] Lei Liang, "About Being Chinese,"*Sonus: A Journal of Investigations into Global Musical Possibilities* 17, no. 1 (1996): 3.

elements of traditional Chinese culture; however, he completely rebuilt these cultural traditions through his own unique interpretation. Lei Weng discusses Liang, together with five other Chinese composers, in an introduction to contemporary Chinese piano music. Weng mentions the influence of the traditional Chinese plucked instrument guqin together with Taoism as inspirations for Liang's works *Garden Eight* and *Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise* to illustrate the way that Liang's musical approach differs from the other five Chinese composers.[2]

This paper will discuss Liang's compositional philosophy, drawing on interviews with the composer and examining his own writings. This essay proposes to illustrate how Liang's personal life experiences influenced his musical creativity and aesthetics. An examination of essays by and interviews with Liang reveals his perspectives on how his Chinese identity and his inspiration from traditional Chinese culture influenced his creation of an independent musical style. Liang's lecture "My personal view of the criteria for education at Harvard University," and interviews by Jie Yang and James Chute will be used to provide details about Liang's musical and life experiences. Liang's essays, "About Being Chinese," "Some Vital Experiences and an Artistic Statement," and "On the Musical Blending of the Chinese and Western Cultures" will be cited to illustrate his personal compositional thoughts and approaches. In addition, the interviews "Tremors of a Memory Chord" and "Bringing Music Closer to Heart" will cover his musical aesthetics and artistic

[2] See Wenzheng Xu, "Xinling zhichuang - Lianglei gangqin zuqu wodechuang pingxi" [My Windows - analysis and commentary on Lei Liang's piano suite], *Renmin Yinyue* 585, no. 1 (2012): 12-15; Lixia Ban, "Yiwei yongbao shijie de xingzhe – lümei zuoqujia lianglei chuangzuo yu guannian pingxi" [A traveler who embraces the world – an analysis of the Chinese-American composer Lei Liang's works and concepts], *Renmin Yinyue* 525, no. 1 (2008): 40-43; Ban, "Bieyang de chuanchen yu baohu, selaxi chuancuo shimo he fenxi" [An analysis of Lei Liang's 'Serashi Fragments' for string quartet], *Huangzhong – Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music* 86, no. 3 (2008): 126-132; Lei Weng, "Influences of Chinese Traditional Cultures on Chinese Composers in the United States since the 1980s, as Exemplified in Their Piano Works" (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2008), 58-62.

pursuits with other Chinese musicians.

The stylistic devices in Liang's piano suite, *My Windows*, will be analyzed to demonstrate how he applies his philosophy to specific aspects of his music including structure, his own compositional style of one-tone polyphony, and the concept of breathing. This discussion of Liang Lei's life, essays and music will illuminate how he attained his unique compositional style, reflecting his own interpretation and expression of Chinese culture.

Lei Liang's Dual Musical Experiences

Lei Liang was born in 1972 in Tianjin Province, China, to a family of musicologists who study both Western and Chinese topics. Liang's mother, Liangyu Cai, is a musicologist at the Art Institute of China. She is one of the first scholars to introduce research on Western art music to the Chinese scholarly community, focusing on American music. By contrast, Lei Liang's father, Maochun Liang, a professor of musicology at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music, specializes in Chinese musical history.[3] Lara Pellegrinelli writes, "Maochun Liang pioneered the study of the music during the Cultural Revolution."[4]

Liang began his first piano lessons with Zhou Guangren when he was four years old. Zhou is one the most significant figures in modern Chinese piano pedagogy, having established an entire level/exam sequence for piano study and performance. She introduced many twentieth-century compositions to Liang through sight-reading assignments and encouraged Liang to improvise on the piano. She believed that, for Liang, learning

[3] Jie Yang, "Zuoqujia lianglei: zhengde zhonghua wenhua de zihaogan" [Composer Lei Liang: earning a cultural confidence], *Epoch Times* (January 2010): 1-3, assessed May 15, 2017, http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/10/1/15/n2787818.htm.

[4] Lara Pellegrinelli, "Hearing History," *The Harvard Magazine* (January-February 2016): 68-70.

compositional techniques was not as essential as early studies in improvising, giving him the opportunity to explore his creativity. Her teaching inspired Liang's passion to create his own music after only two years of study. Liang recalled his earliest memories of composing: "My parents knew I was very bored by practicing. . . . But if I was making the sound, it was OK. So I started making up pieces that sounded like the pieces I was supposed to practice. I didn't know I was composing. It was like a playground where I could play with sounds."[5] Liang's parents were very supportive of his musical studies, and they never prevented him from improvising on the piano while practicing. They understood that the ideas emerging in Liang's mind were the signs of a unique musical gift. His parents protected his music talent and allowed it to grow freely. Often, they encouraged the young Liang to compose a new piece by giving him a new postage stamp as a reward. His father recorded Liang's improvisations and later, taught him music notation. According to James Chute, who interviewed Liang in 2011, Liang believed that "he was very fortunate to be born into this family, calling his home the first school he ever attended."[6]

By age six, playing the piano and composing became the main focus of Liang's everyday activities, and his musical talents became increasingly apparent. As a teenager in China, Liang won prizes in piano and composition. Notably, in 1984, the Xinghai National Piano Music Competition selected one of his piano compositions as one of the mandatory pieces for performance by all of the event's competitors; at that time, he was only twelve

[5] James Chute, "Touched by tragedy at Tiananmen Square, in creating his music, Lei Liang still draws on what he saw," *San Diego Tribune* (April 8, 2011): 1-3, accessed May 5, 2017, http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-UCSD-Lei-Liang-2011apr08-htmlstory.html.

[6] Lei Liang, "Congwo geren de qiuxue jingli tan hafo daxue de jiaoyu linian" [My personal view of the criteria for education at Harvard University – a lecture delivered at Xinghai Conservatory of Music], *Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music* 98, no. 4 (2005): 18-25.

years old.[7] Although we have no trace of the exact music that was chosen for the contest, an achievement at such a young age represents an important recognition of his work by a national music organization.

Everything in Liang's life was stable and peaceful until the protest of Tiananmen Square erupted in 1989, which heavily impacted China's entire political and economic system. As one of the participants in this protest, Liang's personal experience shook his faith in the political climate of China of the time. It greatly changed his perspective on his life, resulting in his later emigration to the United States. Liang recalled that period in his 2011 interview with James Chute. He was only sixteen years old, and his home in Beijing was close to Tiananmen Square. For nearly two months, Liang joined in protest with his friends and classmates, to engage in resolving social problems, issues of freedom of speech, government corruption and the desire for a democracy. The entire process opened Liang's view to the quest for an ideal society. He said, "It was a life-changing experience. I feel like everything I do today is motivated by that experience, by those two months." [8]

After Liang returned home on the night of June 3, 1989, his parents grounded him for the night. Only a few hours later, the crackdown began in the square, and the protestors were forced to leave by the Chinese army. After the long night of being sequestered with his parents, Liang ran back to the square the next day. The marks of violence left by the scene shocked Liang deeply. He recalled:

> I saw the blood, the bullets, smoke everywhere. . . . When something you so passionately believed in is taken away overnight by violence, you start to

[7] Liang's awards include ". . . three honors in the Xinghai National Piano Music Competition (special distinction, 1984; Third Prize, 1987; Second Prize, 1988) . . . and Second Prize for piano performance in the Jing-Jin-Sui competition (1988). In 1989, Beijing Qingnianbao – Beijing Youth Daily – named him one of its ten 'Persons of the Year'." Lei Liang, "Full Biography," at: https://sites.google.com/site/leiliangcomposer2/biography/full-biography, accessed January 28, 2016.

[8] Chute, "Touched by Tragedy," 3.

> think about what are the things that guns cannot take away? . . . Your way of thinking, your fantasies, your culture, your imagination, the things in your mind — those things cannot be taken away by violence. So the best way to defeat violence is to cultivate that world, is to make that world so independent, so free, that it has the power to counter [violence]. And that's how I started on my path.[9]

Liang's path was to put his faith into the one thing that no one or anything could take away: to write music.

This motivation is what still drives him today in his explorations of new music. It also triggered his emigration from China to the United States. In the period following the Tiananmen protest, leaving the country was not an easy option. Liang had help from his uncle and aunt, who were already been living in the United States. Also, an American English teacher, Rose Garrott, heard Liang's music in a recital in Beijing, and her appreciation for Liang's music inspired her to assist Liang to study abroad. With the sponsorship of Ms. Garrot and his aunt and uncle, Liang attended William Race High School in Austin, Texas in 1990.[10]

After high school, Liang focused on composition. He received both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in composition from New England Conservatory of Music, with academic honors and distinction in performance. Later, he completed his Ph.D. in composition at Harvard University. During those years, Liang studied with many composers including Robert Cogan, Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Chaya Czernowin and Mario Davidovsky; he also received numerous awards and prizes.[11]

The move to the United States played an enormous role in Liang's composition

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[9] Chute, "Touched by Tragedy," 3.

[10] Chute, "Touched by Tragedy," 4.

[11] Lei Liang, "Full Biography," https://sites.google.com/site/leiliangcomposer2/biography/full-biography.

career, and he remade his entire musical philosophy after studying in the U.S. The courses offered in the conservatory did not satisfy Liang's craving for a greater knowledge of diverse subjects. When he was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. Liang regularly went to Harvard University and audited classes on various topics such as the history of religion, modern architecture, philosophy, and anthropology. The most exciting place for him was the Harvard–Yenching Library, which holds one of the largest collections of East Asian research in the western world. Liang said, "The first thing I did as soon as I left China and arrived in America was going to the library. I wanted to check as much as I could about what was not taught by the [Chinese] government. There's the mainland China version of its history; I wanted to find out what the Taiwanese had to say, what the Tibetans had to say. And then I realized there was a lot more they didn't teach me."[12]

The Harvard-Yenching library became the place where Liang was introduced to a large collection of writings on the topic of Chinese culture, many of which strongly influenced Liang's musical philosophy. He said that it was a shame he had to read all of these precious treatises in the United States rather than in China. Liang also hand-copied many of his favorite treatises including those of *Tan Jin* (The Platform Sutra) and *Hua Yu Lu* (Language of Painting).[13] During the process of self-education, Liang realized that the Chinese education system did not provide originals of these treatises to young students but only presented partial, or greatly redacted versions. Liang believed that the essential meanings of the original texts had been profoundly altered in the partial and interpreted

[12] Chute, "Touched by Tragedy," 4.

[13] *Tan Jin* is a Chan Buddhist scripture. It records the teachings of Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, who is revered as one of the two great figures in the founding of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. see: Hui-neng, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: the Text of the Tun-Huang Manuscript*, trans. by Philip B. Yampolsky, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. *Hua Yu Lu* records Chinese painter Pan Tianshou's painting philosophy. Pan demonstrates how to use the brush and the ink to achieve artistic aim in Chinese painting. No English translation is available.

versions, and that these versions led the reader to draw incorrect conclusions. Understanding the original versions of these texts, without any interpretation by a third party, became Liang's priority in studying Chinese culture.[14]

Studying aside, the other aspects of Liang's experience living in the United States did not go as smoothly as he expected. In an interview with Molla Doriana, Liang recalled that he had only one dollar per day for food when he first started at the New England Conservatory of Music which allowed him just one meal per day. He had to wear a pair of used and improperly fitting black shoes in order to meet the requirements for a job as a server at a restaurant, returning home each night with his feet bleeding. Liang said, "People can hardly believe it, but it's true, because I know it too well."[15]

Before Liang went to Harvard for his Ph.D., he was invited to Harvard University as a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow, where he met many scholars from various fields from 2002 to 2004. Those three years opened his mind even more to seeking the independence of thought offered by scholarship, along with freedom of thought and speech. Now he believes that these two perspectives should always to be considered as being fundamental to education and cultural development.[16] Since 2010, Liang has served as the chair of the composition department at the University of California, San Diego; he continues with his philosophy to educate new generations of students and to create new music.

Lei Liang's Compositional Philosophy

As noted above, Lei Liang's music reflects his philosophy of life and culture. One of

[14]Lei Liang, "My Personal View," 20.

[15] Molla Doriana, "Lei Liang: Tremors of a Memory Chord & More Music, Secrets and Stories," *Hoctok* (August 2015): 1-2, accessed May 6, 2017, https://www.hoctok.com/lei-liang.html.

[16] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 2.

the most important aspects of his philosophy is to understand what Chinese identity means to him. In his 1996 article, "About Being Chinese," he states that although he is Chinese by blood, for many reasons he does not wear the label of a Chinese composer.[17]

One reason Liang cites is that the socio-musical environment of his generation rarely offered traditional Chinese music. He writes, "The Peking Opera, folk songs, court music, Confucian ceremonial music, etc., were not present in our daily social musical life. . . . In my leisure time, with my school friends in the Central Conservatory of Beijing, I listened to recordings by the Beatles and Michael Jackson. I remember that I could sing the Beatles even before I could speak English."[18] The dominant styles of popular music found in Chinese social media of the time were those of Western countries. During that early period of his life, Liang learned piano as his only instrument, instead of traditional Chinese instruments, and only playing what would be considered Western (European) classical music. Nevertheless, he was also able to gain a limited knowledge about traditional Chinese music from his parents and music history classes at the music school.[19]

At that time, the predominating social influences encouraged people to believe that learning a western instrument was better than learning traditional Chinese instruments. In "About Being Chinese," Liang says, "In fact, in China the piano had become a symbol of, or a short-cut to, so-called higher education and higher social status, whereas there is a commonly shared prejudice that traditional Chinese instruments are not very, so to speak, 'high class'."[20] Liang refers to the fact that his home country did not respect or value its own musical culture. In other words, due to the Cultural Revolution, Chinese musical traditions

[17] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 2.
[18] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 3.
[19] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 3.
[20] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 4.

ceased developing and were therefore gradually relegated to a secondary cultural status in Chinese society.

The Cultural Revolution intended to eliminate feudalism and capitalism, in order to establish an ideal communist society. All of the old things were considered evil, and any Chinese traditions were destroyed regardless of their quality or value. Therefore at the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-80s, many passionate scholars were eager to retrieve what had been lost during that period. From his perspective as a composer, Liang observes, "Many [Chinese] composers focus their interests in ancient Chinese philosophy, traditional literature, or the so-called 'primeval culture' or name their music with words such as 'emptiness' or 'Tao' to remind others that we are 'Chinese composers'."[21] What Liang means here is that this kind of music merely represents borrowed or rearranged materials in modern idioms. Although a composer tries to tell people that this is Chinese music, it is without any profound understanding of traditional Chinese culture, and only gives shallowness to the music, establishing no emotional connection between composer and listener. Liang believes this tendency leads to an incorrect conclusion that music based on the past will stimulate national pride.

From the historical point of view, the word "China" comes from two sources. One is the name of the first empire--the Qin Dynasty. The other source dates from the time period when a large amount of porcelain (china) was imported into Europe, resulting in the word "china" being used to refer to the country. However, it is also a word by which others label the country, and subsequently, their identity. According to Liang, if one needs to label his/her identity, it shows only weakness and powerlessness.[22] Liang provides some

[21] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 5.
[22] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 5.

examples to support his position of finding true identity in Chinese culture. He writes:

> The word Chinese is, in fact, very un-Chinese. To think of the most splendid times in our history, the Han and the Tang periods, for example, there was no such notion as Chinese culture. The world culture was, for Tang people, Chinese culture. Buddhism was imported into China in the Han Dynasty, and along with it many instruments that we regard as traditional Chinese instruments today. In the court music of the Tang Dynasty, we find that a good part of the repertoire was imported from Asia Minor. . . . For me, the essence of Chinese culture is the carefreeness in its identity. It opens to, and embraces all. [23]

Liang realizes that to truly become a composer who represents Chinese culture, one must break through the limitation of being a Chinese person, keep an open mind, and absorb as many resources as possible from all over the world.

Liang's experiences and philosophy shape his musical style in a specific way, in which the core inspiration lies in Chinese culture, but he notes that this did not evolve from his Chinese identity. Liang believes that being of Chinese nationality does not provide him with the capability for understanding Chinese culture; only by study can a person connect to the root of this culture. In his 2012 article, "Some Vital Experiences and an Artistic Statement," written for Chinese readers, Liang indicates that what he desires is neither the label of so-called Chinese tradition nor the nostalgia for an ancient eastern culture. In Liang's view, tradition, history and individual experience all blend together to create various forms of art. Uncertainty, fluidity and controversy dominate the nature of all cultural evolution. He states that any specific definition of a certain type of tradition only enhances the danger of inhibiting both individual thinking and developing an independent personality. Liang writes, "Using an old melody with a label of exoticism shows a mark of laziness and

[23] Liang, "About Being Chinese," 5.

deficiency of creativity."[24]

In the same article, Liang describes that one of his musical concepts, one-tone polyphony, focuses on constant variations of concise, raw material, in complex musical configurations. At the same time, he develops a basic motif in various ways so as to reveal the original meaning and beauty of the idea. Delivering his personal thoughts and his experiences of an idea becomes the final goal that Liang tries to achieve in his music. In order to fulfill this purpose, he experiments with different kinds of music media from every possible angle to test the validity of his theory. Liang hopes every note that he creates can bear an icon of sophisticated craftsmanship. He states, "The music should also maintain the warmness of humanity and carry the depth of time."[25]

Liang explains several rules that help him pursue this goal. He remains close to history and culture, because historical fact serves as his basic inspiration. He also remains open to doubt, question, and argument over compositional rules. No matter if it is old music or new, he believes in seriously examining and questioning any and all music materials, techniques and details. He refuses to follow the strict obedience of any authority, to search for shortcuts, or to blindly follow the most popular approach. Lastly and most importantly, he believes a composer must understand the purpose of his/her own music making and inject his own personality to make the music alive.[26]

In a 2006 interview in *Renmin yinue.* Liang explains four important ideas of how he translates Chinese philosophy into his compositions. The interview discusses how the composer blends multiple cultural elements into his music to achieve his compositional

[24] Lei Liang, "Dui wo shenyou yingxiang de jige tiyan he yixie chuangzuo xiangfa" [Some Vital Experiences and an Artistic Statement], *Renmin Yinyue* 585, no. 1 (2012): 10.
[25] Liang, "Some Vital Thoughts," 10.
[26] Liang, "Some Vital Thoughts," 10.

objectives. First, he advises, "Do not trap yourself in the past or now, eastern or western, one should always follow nature to find beauty in the balance."[27] Liang explains that he tries to blend multi-dimensional aspects of culture into his own work. However, it is important to say the word "No." He believes the imagination of a composer should comprehend the existing concepts, then draw freely from them to create a new path above them. Liang states:

> As artists, we are always facing and against the entire world. This is not hubris. One needs to be able to speak differently than the others and maintain an independent status. . . . People are the media of culture. The size of a person's imagination equals the size of the culture. Through people's experiences, one can make these imaginations become the reality. I create music as a result of following my own imagination of the culture that I encountered.[28]

Following this idea, in his harpsichord piece, *Some Empty Thoughts of a Person from Edo,* Liang adopts four elements: the Baroque fantasia, newly invented playing techniques for harpsichord, materials of the seventeenth century Japanese koto and Korean kayagum, and a recorded improvisational passage.[29] The composer writes, "[I]t reflects a person gone astray in fancy, absorbed in beauty, perpetuated in sorrow. . . . *Empty Thoughts* became a passport to reclaim some parts of past."[30]

Liang's second idea is to draw a philosophical description of music from one of the greatest Chinese philosophers and writers of Taoism, Chuangtse (d. 275 B.C.E). Chuangtse said, "…其卒无尾，其始无首" (The music vanishes without ending, begins without

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[27] Lei Liang, "Tiejin zi xin de yinyue: lianglei jin zuo san ren tan Li, Xi'an, Xie Jiaxing and Lei Liang" [Bringing music closer to heart – an interview with Li Xi-an and Xie Jia-xing], *Renmin Yinyue* 479, no. 2 (2006): 27.

[28] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 28.

[29] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 28. Liang instructs the player to use the palm to press the keyboard. Meanwhile, the movement of the hands needs to be slow enough to produce an unpredictable roll of tone clusters. Liang intends to make this old instrument produce a new sound; koto and kayagum are seventeenth century traditional plucked instruments.

[30] Lei Liang, *Some Empty Thoughts of a Person from Edo* (New York: Schott Music Corporation, 2001), 1.

opening).[31] Liang explains that traditional western musical form always contains a motive which will be constructed towards an ultimate climax, then finishes with a definite ending. Chuangtse suggests taking the opposite view. There is no dramatic progress. Liang describes, in this case, that the music focuses on one period of feelings, resembling the status of chanting meditation in Buddhism.

Liang applied Chuangtse's idea in his *Hu Zhi Yi* (Lake, 1999) for double flute, in which the composer directs the performers and audiences to engage their own breathing. Liang explains that the inspiration of this piece came from a scene that he encountered while studying Buddhism in a temple near New York.[32] One day when he took a walk along a lake, Liang saw a V-shaped figure moving slowly on the surface of water. He took a closer look and found that it was an otter swimming. In *Hu Zhi Yi,* Liang intends to depict the music as the peaceful lake, and the performer as the otter swimming and breathing freely through the music. He says, "Let the musicians draw their own marks. The edge between a piece of art and the practical world becomes blurred."[33]

A third idea for Liang is to blend the abstract and the concrete. Liang finds that a blend of artificial and natural elements expresses the idea of humanizing all the materials within music. In *Xiao Xiang* (2002) for saxophone and electronic music, Liang adds preprogramed electronic music to create the sadness and desperation of a given story.[34] He

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[31]Chuangtze, "庄子 (Chuangtze)." Chuangtze explains that everything that happens in our world is following a Tao (road), in which whatever happens is natural. Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are the three main Chinese philosophical systems, extending through all dynasties and generations.

[32] Liang, "Some Vital Thoughts." 10.

[33] Liang, "Some Vital Thoughts," 10.

[34] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 30. "During the Cultural Revolution in Dao Xian, Hunan province, the head of the village persecuted a man to death. The man's wife had no help to find justice for her husband. The only thing she could do was stand in the woods behind the house at the head of the village and cry nonstop day and night like a ghost. After a few months, she, the head of the village, and all in it went insane. When Mo visited Dao Xian to collect more details of this story, the residences of the village could not tell what really happened. The only thing Mo can find is the local folk song *yaoge*. Liang mentions that Mo

quotes a sentence from *A New Account of the Tales of the World*, in which the quality of instruments is ranked: "丝不如竹，竹不如肉。渐进自然。" (Woodwinds are better than strings; however, the human voice is the best. Why? One is more natural than the other).[35] In *Xiao Xiang*, Liang manipulates the recorded materials of human voice and the saxophone through electronic output to distort their original qualities, blurring the boundary between human voice, instrument, and electronic sound. When Liang uses fully synthesized sound in the piece, he tries to hide it behind the human voice and the instruments. Liang insists that humanity should be the dominant force behind the music; every note needs to be thoughtfully touched by himself. The artificial invention should not lead the way, but assists in expressing the musical idea.[36]

Traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy become the source for Liang's fourth inspirational idea: simplicity and complexity. This idea culminates in a compositional innovation that Liang calls one-tone polyphony.[37] He mentions the contrasting styles of two twentieth-century Chinese artists, Tianshou Pan (1897-1971) and Hongbin Huang (1865-1955),[38] as the inspiration for his chamber work, *Brush Stroke* (2004). In the first half of

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had intended to write an opera based on the Dao xian story but only finished the overture. After Mo died in 1994. Liang wrote a piece called *京剧独白* (Chinese Opera Monologue) based on the same story to commemorate his friends. It is a vocal work with staging and lighting. The recorded voice that Liang used in *Xiao Xiang* is possibly from Mo's opera overture."

[35] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 31.

[36] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 30.

[37] In Chinese history of painting and calligraphy, since the Song Dynasty, color is used less frequently than before. Chinese artists mainly apply stone ink as their main source of paint to draw or write on soft rice paper with a soft brush pen. A large portion of the paintings were made in different shades of gray, with a few other colors. The style tends to be graceful and elegant.

[38] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 31. Pan's style focused on conciseness to convey the spirit using only minimal brush strokes to complete a painting. However, within the conciseness, every brush stoke Pan made was unusually sophisticated. Liang comments, "None of the stroke is not genius; none of the stroke is not astonishing." By contrast, Huang concentrated on a realistic style, and his painting contains numerous details. Liang comments that Huang's painting has the quality of Impressionism. He notes that if one looks at the pictures too closely, the thick layers of ink make the picture as unclear as a piece of black paper. However, viewed from a distance, all the details are revealed. Liang quotes Huang's aphorism that "One stroke is simple. One thousand is still simpler."

Brush Stroke, the music has only a single-voice melodic line; however, every note contains multiple layers. Liang combines the timbres of several instruments on a single pitch to create a unique, but never-simple line. In the second half of the *Brush Stroke*, Liang increases "the density of the music into a complex entity, while creating the concise effects through meticulous details."[39] Liang explains that in Western tradition, tonality and harmony limit the variations of timbre possible on a single note. The juxtapositions and the executions of pitches establish a melody. By contrast, in Chinese calligraphy or guqin music, opposing aesthetics require one to use minimum materials to carry complex meanings.[40] Liang applies the idea of one-tone polyphony further in pieces such as his piano suite *My Windows*.

Liang studied sound spectra to better understand the complexity of timbre used in guqin music. Liang's spectrum analysis is the subject of Lixia Ban's report on the composer's musical ideas. Ban notes how Liang analyzed the guqin and found that the spectrum of sound can vary tremendously within one pitch. Based on the understanding of this special feature of guqin music, Liang experimented with all kinds of possibilities by combining different instruments, dynamics, durations, and articulations to achieve variations of timbre within a single pitch. He says, "every note is an intersection which can lead to any other spaces…there are multiple layers in one pitch, the foreground of the layer is embedded into a constantly changing background….I hope everyone who plays my music can consider every note as a connected space. In these spaces, the musicians can communicate through

[39] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 31.

[40] Lei Liang, "Jiyi de xiandong: Liang lei, Chen bixian, Shao en, Fan weici tan gangqin yu mingzu yuedui xiezouqu de *chuangzuo yu quanshi"* [Tremors of a memory chord—a discussion between Lei Liang, Pi-Hsien Chen, En Shao and Wei-Tsu Fan on the composition and interpretation of a work by Lianglei written for the piano and grand Chinese orchestra], edited by Yeung-Ping Chen and Lei Liang, *Zhongyang Yinyue Xueyuan Xuebao* 1, no. 1 (2012): 44.

the music."[41]

Compositional Style in *My Windows*

Liang's compositional methods incorporate many of his philosophical ideas. Liang's piano suite *My Windows* shows many such musical applications of the composer's ideas. The suite will be analyzed here; the analysis includes discussions of structure, one-tone polyphony and the concept of breathing.

Structure

My Windows comprises four movements that were composed over eleven years (1996-2007): "Tian," "Seven Rays of the Sun," "Magma," and "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise." The overall structure of the entire suite forms an arch shape. The outer two movements are based on the same musical material and in a slow tempo. The second movement is fluid and quiet; it leads to the active third movement. In each movement, per his philosophy, Liang draws his inspiration from specific subjects including religious arts, nature, and personal feelings (see Table 1).

[41] Lixia Ban, "Yiwei yongbao shijie de xingzhe – lümei zuoqujia lianglei chuangzuo yu guannian pingxi" [A traveler who embraces the world – an analysis of the Chinese-American composer Lei Liang's works and concepts], *Renmin Yinyue* 525, no. 1 (2008): 41. Lixia Ban indicates the quotation is from a speech given at Harvard in 2005.

Table 1. *My Windows,* musical material, tempo and subject.

Movement	**Tempo**	**Musical material**	**Subject (Image evoked)**
Tian	Lento	Six pitches, six relative durations	Heaven in Buddhism
Seven Rays of the Sun	Andante	Repeating notes, glissando	Image from the text of the Hindu *Vishnu Purana*
Magma	Presto	Running sixteenth notes	Magma
Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise	Largo	Tian material, tone clusters	Evocation of personal feelings

The first movement of *My Windows*, "Tian," emphasizes the process of thinking without giving meanings to the notes. Liang sets the meter in 4/4; the tempo is slow; and the pitches are serialized (see Example 1). He picks the number six as the fundamental organizing element. Liang writes, "*Tian* consists of six relative durations and six pitches that are each permutated six times," and uses the pitch collection (prime form 0, 1, 2, 4, 7, 9). [42]

Liang states that the second movement, "Seven Rays of the Sun," was inspired by an image in *Vishnu Purana*, one of the ancient texts of Hinduism. This movement is through-composed with a closing section, Liang writes, "After the suns burn up the three worlds, a hundred years of rain pours down to envelop the worlds in one ocean. In the last section of the piece (the rays of the light sinking into the deep sea), I imagine the mysterious rays of light sinking into the deep seas while Vishnu sleeps on the waters."[43] Throughout the

[42] Lei Liang, *My Windows* (New York: Scott Music Corporation, 2004), 1.
[43] Liang, "My Windows," 1.

movement, Liang uses single or grouped *glissandi* as one of the main techniques to represent his musical ideas. He also applies the concept of one-tone polyphony, as discussed below.

The third movement, "Magma," describes the unstable and constant movement of magma underneath the surface of the Earth. The source of this inspiration is unknown. Liang sets this movement in AB form. Section A is agitated but quiet; Section B builds up to an "explosive ending," and the entire score is written below the pitch of C4. Liang builds the tempo of *presto* by using incessant thirty seconds-notes, contrasting with the *lento* and *andante* of the first two movements (see Example 2).

Liang uses the fourth movement, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," to describe a personal spiritual journey. Liang states that the fourth movement relates back to the first one: "Pausing. . . is based on the first movement *Tian*. It is a reflection of the sound I encountered while strolling in the woods."[44] He notes that he derived the inspiration for this movement from the Japanese Zen Buddhist treatise *正法眼藏* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye) by the monk Seng Yuan. The story tells how a Chinese monk found his *satori* (a sudden arrival at a state of spiritual enlightenment) through listening to the wind in the woods.[45] Thus, in the last movement of the suite, Liang adapts the concept of the story to himself, where his own *satori* is the state of one who, after ten years, has suddenly found his own voice as a composer. In Liang's perspective, Buddhist philosophy does not provide a purpose, but is rather a progression of finding insight through meditation, and arriving at a state of non-judgement of oneself. The music details in Liang's own spiritual journey to his

[44] Liang, "My Windows," 1.

[45] Lei Liang, "He'er butong de youyi – ji yu Cai Zhongde xiansheng de zhenglun" [Contending friendship – my debate with prof. Cai Zhongde on Buddhist musical aesthetics], *Zhongyang Yinyue Xueyuan Xuebao* 102, no. 1 (2006): 134. Liang mentioned this story in a letter that he wrote to Zhongde Cai who is an important musicologist, and expert on traditional Chinese musical aesthetics.

own enlightenment, by mirroring the changes in his psyche and his breathing.

One-tone Polyphony

One-tone polyphony is one of Liang's major compositional concepts. In addition to the inspiration from Chinese calligraphy described previously, Liang transfers the techniques of the Chinese plucked instrument guqin to Western instruments in order to develop variations of timbre within one pitch. Liang derived the style after studying guqin in 1997, with the Chinese music scholar Rulan Zhao. Playing the guqin requires the right hand to pluck the string while the left hand presses the string. Liang has said:

> I noticed that in guqin music, a player can create complex sound within a single note. Different tone inflections on the left hand combining with various choices of fingering in the right hand implies countless possibilities of timbre. . . .Every note is an intersection which can lead to any other spaces…there are multiple layers in one pitch, the foreground of the layer is embedded into a constantly changing background. . . . I hope everyone who plays my music can consider every note as a connected space. In these spaces, we all can communicate through the music.[46]

In "Seven Rays of the Sun" and "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," Liang applies one-tone polyphony to the pedaling and *glissandi,* achieving innovative piano timbres that interrupt the expected Western sound.[47]

Liang focuses on using the damper pedal as one of the approaches to find new ways to produce various sound from the piano. The pedal functions similarly to the left hand in guqin playing, creating certain inflections of tone. The pianist can directly affect the vibration by pedaling after depressing the key. In mm. 38-40 of "Seven Rays of the Sun," Liang specifically indicates, "Change pedal frequently at various time intervals to change

[46] Lixia Ban, "Yiwei yongbao shijie de xingzhe – lümei zuoqujia lianglei chuangzuo yu guannian pingxi" [A traveler who embraces the world – an analysis of the Chinese-American composer Lei Liang's works and concepts], *Renmin Yinyue* 525, no. 1 (2008): 41.
[47] Neither "Tian" nor "Magma" uses one-tone polyphony.

the resonance" (see Example 3). The pedal becomes the dominant factor to create musical direction and various resonances. Liang extends the use of the pedal beyond its normal, western functions (such as sustaining notes to connect and shape phrases) to imitate the musical and aesthetic effects of the guqin, creating an effect similar to the vibrato on a stringed instrument; this effect is what he terms one-tone polyphony.

In "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," Liang specifies to two types of timbre in a long note, held through ten measures (see Example 4). He indicates to "half-change the pedal to thin out the previous low F" for a single note in m. 14. In this case, Liang places a muted *fortississimo* on F1 in m. 10, with the damper pedal held down through m. 17. He wants to continually sustain the F till m. 20. During the process, he requests the pianist to create a thinner timbre by half-changing the pedal in the middle of m. 17.

In "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise", Liang uses the sound of the pedal's movement (unpitched noise, something avoided in Western music) to create another form of one-tone polyphony; this is yet another idea acquired from guqin practice. Liang explains that in ancient Chinese music notation, the composers count noises as part of the effect and notate them in Chinese tablature. Liang also directs the pianist to "change the pedal violently resulting in some noise from the pedal," which creates an effect similar to the authentic sound of the guqin, becoming still another voice built on the existing pitch, adding another dimension to the concept of one-tone polyphony (see Example 5).

In addition to the use of the pedal, Liang also employs glissando effects to enhance the effects of one-tone polyphony. In "Seven Rays of the Sun," he uses two types of execution. The first one appears in mm. 18-19, where Liang marks "seamlessly" (see Example 6). The other one appears in m. 56, requires "the glissando to be extremely delicate

with notes occasionally missing" (see Example 7). This indication serves a specific musical purpose. Because the last section has the subtitle, "the rays of light sinking into the deep sea" (mm, 48-66), I suggest that the missing notes in the glissando imply the refraction of light rays in the water. In order to achieve this refractive effect, the performer needs to imitate the practice of guqin by changing the pressure and speed of the hand sliding on the keys during the glissando. A glissando could be interpreted as one gesture of tone. Thus, Liang's approach adds color and variation to the sliding of one tone, further fulfilling his concept of one-tone polyphony.

The Concept of Breathing

Liang is strongly influenced by Buddhism. In Buddhist practice, one of the meditative disciplines concentrates on breathing (the progression of breath), known as "entering the state of Chan." The purpose of this practice is to empty the mind, focusing only on one's own breathing. Liang has noted that during one period of his life, he sought a way for expressing Chan in his music.[48] Liang also quotes, "People ask Buddha: how long is life. Buddha says, the length of life is between inhalation and exhalation."[49]

Liang tries to imprint his own psychological and physical processes, or in his words, "the breathing and its transformation onto the score as precisely as possible. *My Windows* is one of the works in this style."[50] In his essay "Some Vital Thoughts," Liang writes, "Every note carries its life and energy which is just another form of breathing including rhythm, duration, depth, and their transformation. One can use music to illustrate the constant changing nature of our breathing, or our world."[51] Elsewhere, he writes: "The process of

[48] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 32.
[49] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 30.
[50] Liang, "Some Vital Thoughts," 11.
[51] Liang, "Some Vital Thoughts," 10.

creating my composition forms a circle, where the musical thoughts create psychological influences, which are reflected in my own breathing; I describe this as writing down music which is close to my breath and heart."[52] Liang takes these three elements: musical thoughts, psychological process, and breathing, translating them into the score through meter, duration, dynamics, and instruction**.**

Liang first engages his own breathing, projecting the breath-patterns into the music through, a use of mixed meter, which can be seen in the "Seven Rays of the Sun" and "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise." In "Seven Rays of the Sun," at m. 57, Liang uses 2/4+1/8 in a single measure which is entirely silent, notated with rests (see Example 8). Then, he makes a sudden change of meter, to 5/4+1/8, and at m. 59 changes to 4/4. In m. 58 and m. 59, Liang indicates a downward glissando of equal duration and dynamics, to correspond with his breathing during the compositional process, the first glissando covers two octaves (F6-F4), while the second covers two octaves and a fourth (C6-G3); there is also a pause of greater duration after the glissando in m. 58.

In "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," Liang applies mixed meter frequently throughout the entire movement. His breathing dictates the metrical flow of the music. There are four meter changes in mm. 1-6 (see Example 9) and four meter changes in mm. 18-21 (see Example 10). Liang's approach provides for specific metrical guidelines, giving the effect of an improvisation. I suggest that the length of each note and rest reflects the state of the breath as it responds to impressions from Liang's psyche, with frequent changes of breath producing different durations of sound and silence. In m. 1 of "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," Liang indicates using the pedal for one measure of rest. In m.2, Liang uses a

[52] Liang, "Bringing Music Closer," 29-30.

slur to connect the note (F-sharp 4) through m. 4. The duration of F-sharp 4 in m. 2 is set to an eighth-note value. The rest of the slur connects fifteen eighth-note rests until m. 4; the damper pedal keeps the sound going during the rests.

Liang's concept of creating Chan in the music can be seen clearly in the first movement of *My Windows*, where the composer suggests a complete meditative state by holding the pedal down throughout the movement, with a stable 4/4 meter. It contains the tone row (0, 1, 2, 4, 7, 9) and its permutation six times. Within each permutation, the durations of the individual pitches and rests are always different. However, Liang sets the outer duration of each permutation more closely to three and half measures, to include the complete silence from the last beat of m. 22 through m. 25. The third movement, "Magma," falls into the same category, with a steady meter in 4/4, yet this time invoking the agitated status of magma.

Liang also purposely marks out every single dynamic gesture, both linearly and vertically, to express the conflicting and exploding images of magma in "Magma" (see Example 11). In m. 40, beats 1 and 2, Liang makes a decrescendo from *forte* to *pianissimo* by way of only five thirty-second notes in the left hand. In mm.41-42, there are eleven contrasting dynamic marks for each two-note group in the right hand, with only eight marks in the left hand.

I suggest that the vertical dynamic effects produce various spaces and levels of volume which resemble the physiological process in breathing. In m. 18 of "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," the right hand (B6) is set to f*ortissimo* while an accent in the left hand (A-sharp 6) is set to *mezzo forte* with *staccato* (see Example 12). In beat six of the same measure, D-flat 4 of the the left hand interval is set to *mezzo piano* and C5 is in *piano*.

The details of vertical dynamics also provide indication of specific sonorities and voicing to further express Liang's musical ideas.

In addition to the common musical terms and signs, Liang adds his own instructions to specify a given tone color (such as "much warmth" and "radiant"), or to indicate a specific sound effect ("like a bell" or "echo"), and also to indicate a gesture by the performer ("forcefully" or "violently") to project the effect into the music. I suggest that these instructions are the result of Liang's mental impressions and his breathing while composing, which he gives to more effectively carry out his musical ideas. At the same time, Liang tries to use instructions to engage the player's breathing in performance. He says, ". . . I try to suggest ways in which the pianist experiences the keyboard. A correct execution should not only achieve the desired sonority, but also communicate kinesthetically the relationship between notes. Carefully choreographed movements should enhance the kinesthetic/acoustic/visual connection between seemingly isolated sonic events."[53]

In piano performance technique, the pianist needs to create a prehearing before depressing the keyboard. The prehearing will regulate the performer's inhalations as well as his exhalations. Liang's instructions specify the musical ideas beyond the dynamics, articulation and phrasing, and they provide a fourth dimension, by engaging the performers' own breathing.

Three kinds of instructions can be found throughout the movements of *My Windows*. The first are indications of tone color. D1 is one of the notes in m. 18 of "Tian"; Liang adds the instructions "much warmth" to a *forte* dynamic marking (see Example 13). The words add a strong contrast, compared to the cool and meditative state of the rest of the movement.

[53] Lei Liang, *Garden Eight* (New York: Scott Music Corporation, 2004), 1.

His indication gives a clear instruction for the performer to create a warmer sound instead of the normal *forte.* Another example can be found in "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," at m.18 where Liang puts "fragile" for the last interval in the left hand. A warmer sound suggests to the performer to breathe more deeply and fully. On the contrary, a fragile sound suggests to breathe more shallowly and lightly.

Liang's second type of instruction relates to creating specific sound effects. For example, in m. 6 of "Seven Rays of the Sun," Liang indicates "like a bell" for the chord in the second half of beat 4 (see Example 14). He then writes "echo" for the chord in m. 7, on the second half of beat 2. The sound quality of the chord in m. 6 establishes a relationship to the "echo" in m. 7, and must be interpreted accordingly. In performance, the pianist needs to exhale more slowly in m. 7 to achieve an echo effect, relative to m. 6.

The third type of instruction indicates specific movements for the body, to portray the effects of the music. In "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," on the third beat of m. 18, Liang uses "forcefully" to emphasize the *fortissimo* and accents, which should be performed with the appropriate gesture (see Example 15). In t on the second beat of m. 10, Liang again indicates *fortissimo* (for the tone cluster), but writes "violently" to project the intensity of the moment (see Example 16). "As if Crazy" is Liang's indication at m.23 of the third movement, *Magma* (see Example 17). The passage at mm. 23-25 functions as a transition to section B. Liang's words precisely depict the moment that the two parallel voices of section A are going to dissolve into section B; Liang tells the performers that the magma is losing its control "as if crazy." The words suggests that the pianist group the notes irregularly, symbolizing loss of control; the pianist will need to breathe accordingly, with the groupings.

Liang translates the concept of breathing from the practice of Buddhist meditation into his own compositional language. In *My Windows*, he uses meter, duration, dynamics and instructions in specific ways to convey his musical ideas. By constructing his composition through the philosophy of Buddhist breathing, Liang approaches his work from an independent and unique perspective.

Conclusion

Lei Liang's musical philosophy is a mirror of his life experiences. As a talented young boy, he developed doubts about the Chinese educational system, and was later strongly influenced by the events of Tiananmen Square. His knowledge of Chinese traditions came not in his home country, but after he came to live in the United States.

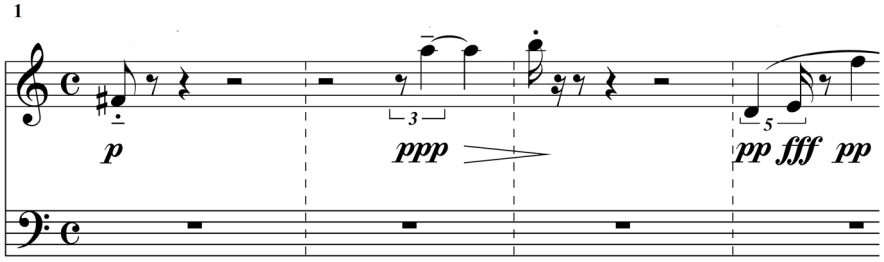
Both eastern and western cultures influenced Liang's compositional style. He seeks inspiration from Chinese traditions, and his music represents his unique interpretation of Chinese culture. At the same time, he values an independent style of creativity, drawing from the musical traditions of all cultures, never simply copying any existing musical idioms. He believes that as a Chinese composer, he must transcend his identity as a Chinese person.

Through the analysis of his compositional style in *My Windows* given in this paper, one opens the door to Liang's unique perspective as a composer. He draws inspiration from traditional Chinese music, manipulating the sound in a way that does not simply imitate its forms and effects. Studying his technique of one-tone polyphony allows others to reconsider the contrapuntal possibilities within modern composition. Liang's application of the concept of breathing adds yet another individual and unique philosophical dimension to his music.

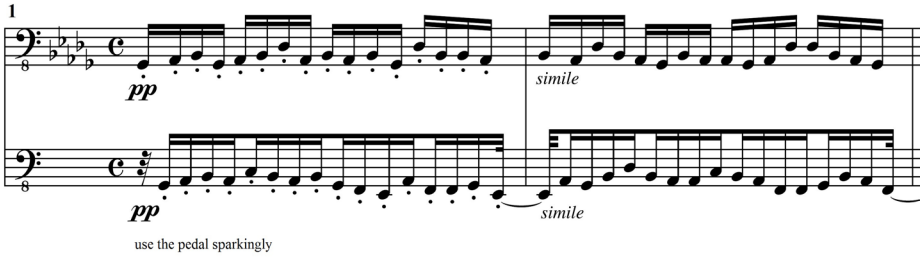
Lei Liang seeks to reengage the spirit of the Chinese culture which he believes had been lost in the music- making of modern China, expressing these traditional elements within a new and uniquely personal musical language.

Appendix

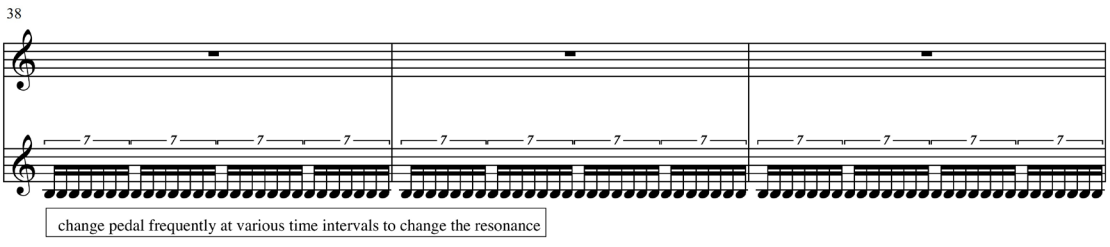
Example 1. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Tian," mm.1-4. Pitch collection.



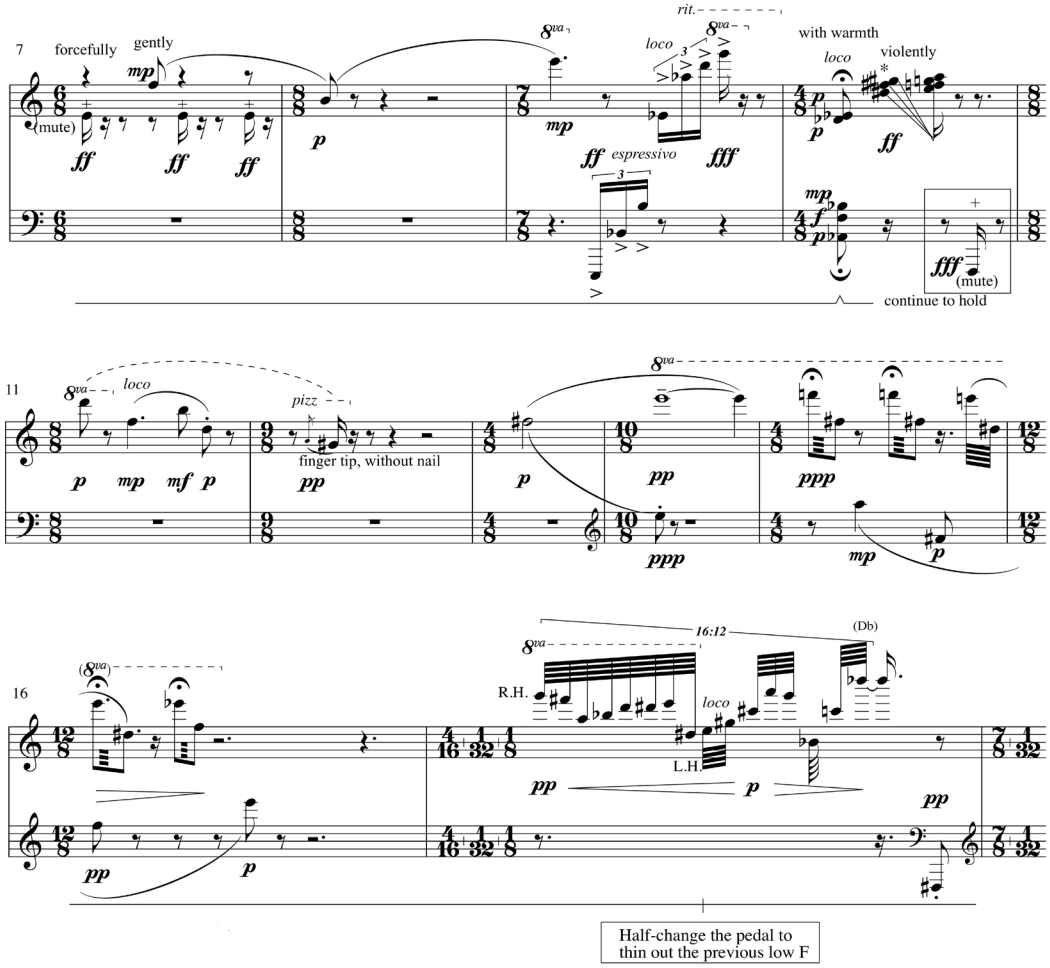
Example 2. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Magma," mm. 1-2.



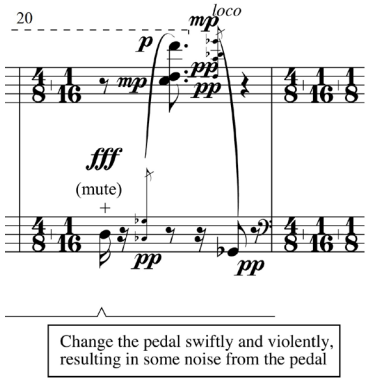
Example 3. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Seven Rays of the Sun," mm. 38-40. Instruction on pedaling.



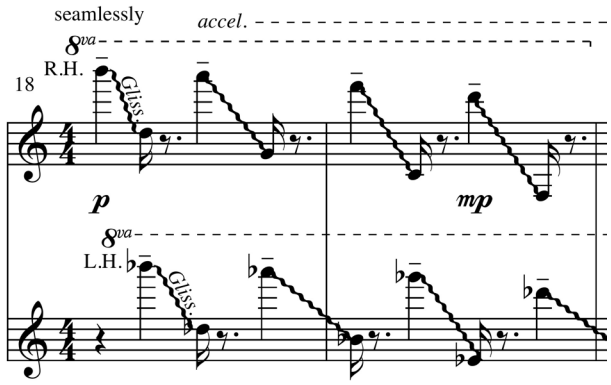
Example 4. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," mm. 7-17. Instructions on pedal change, mm.10, 17.



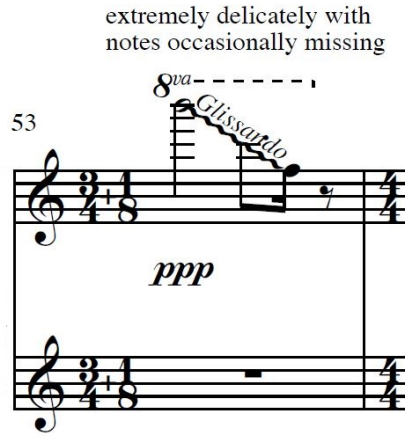
Example 5. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," m. 20. Instruction on pedal noise.



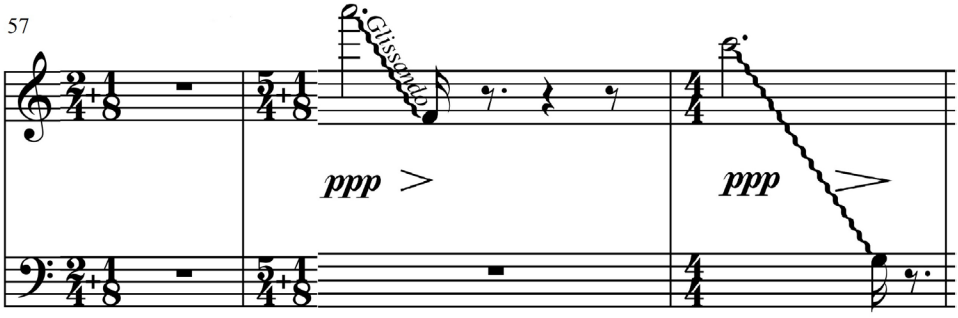
Example 6. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Seven Rays of the Sun," mm. 18-19. Full glissando.



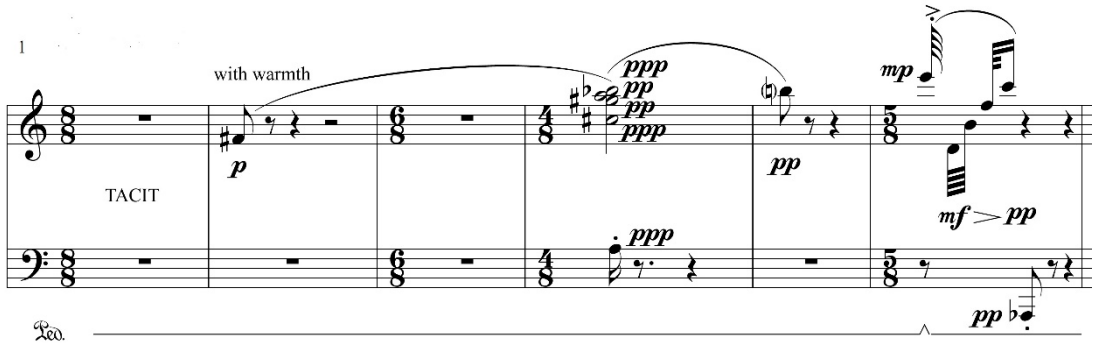
Example 7. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Seven Rays of the Sun," m. 53. Gapped glissando.



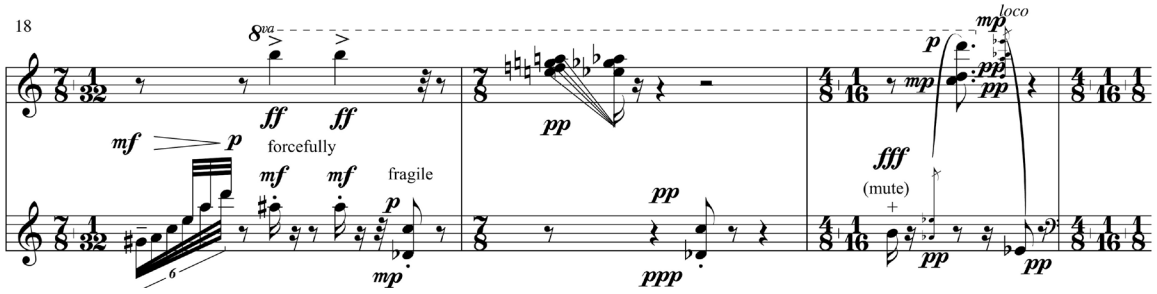
Example 8. Liang, *My Windows*, "Seven Rays of the Sun," mm. 57-59. Mixed meter.



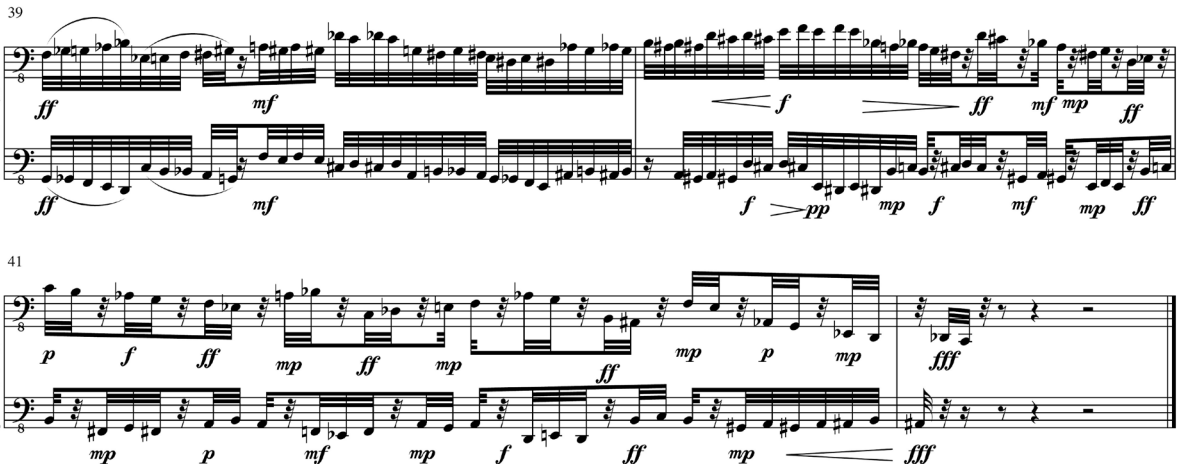
Example 9. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," mm. 1-6. Mixed meter.



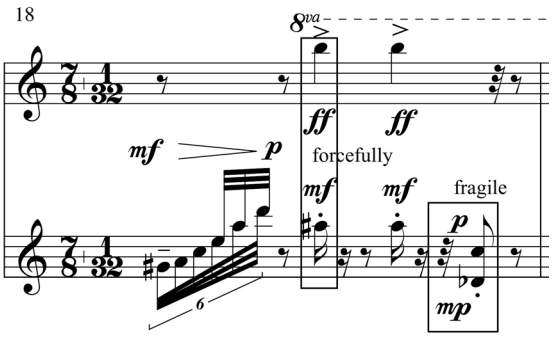
Example 10. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," mm. 18-21. Mixed meter.



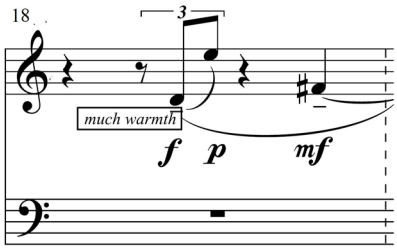
Example 11. Lei Liang, My Windows, "Magma," mm. 39-42. Dynamic instructions.



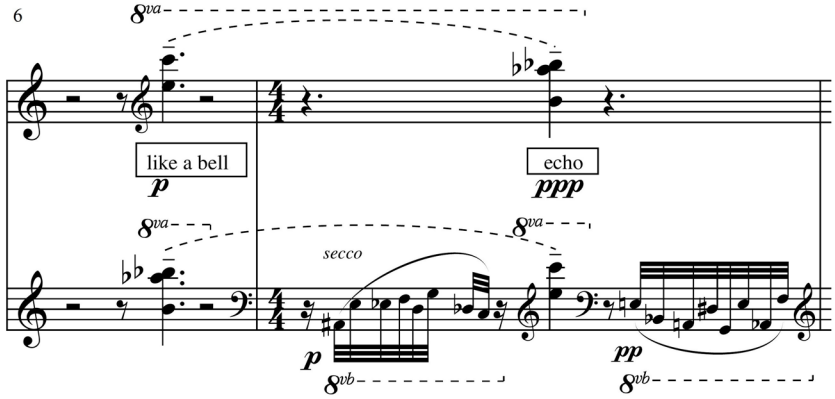
Example 12. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise," m. 18. Instructions on voicing.



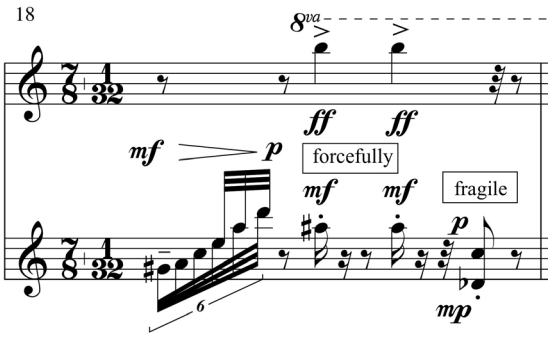
Example 13. Lei Liang, "Tian," *My Windows*, m. 18. Timbre markings.



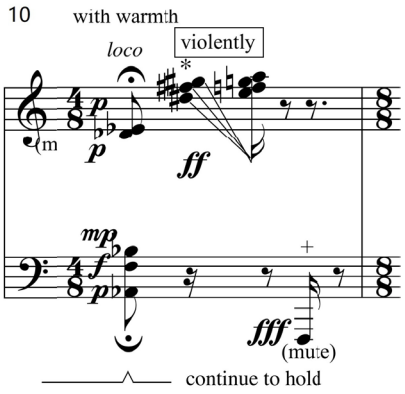
Example 14. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Seven Rays of the Sun," mm. 6-7. Instructions on timbre.



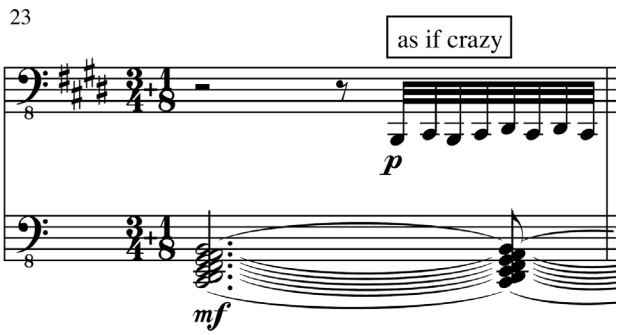
Example 15. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, “Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise,” m. 18. Instructions on timbre.



Example 16. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, "Pausing, Awaiting the Wind to Rise,” m. 10. Instruction on timbre.



Example 17. Lei Liang, *My Windows*, “Magma,” m. 23. Instruction, musical effect.



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